

Sermon: October 31, 2021

“The Fruits Which We Have Borne”

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Scripture: Romans 5:12-21; Luke 24:36-49

Some of you, particularly those on the search committee that interviewed me, know that I like socks. Fall and winter are my favorite because I can really bring out all my most funky socks. Today, I'm wearing a pair of my favorite socks: which may or may not be considered especially funky. They were a gift from Donna and are from her homeland: Britain. I love all things about Britain, actually, and find its history fascinating. Of course, like all history, England's history is a bit problematic. In recent months, I've been listening to some history podcasts, many of which give the history of Europe and particularly England. My favorite period to learn about is the Renaissance because it was a time of such miraculous changes in so many areas of life and was the time of huge shifts in religious belief without which, denominations like the UCC and churches like ours would not exist.

Since it's Halloween, many of my podcasts have turned to covering some of the more gruesome or frightening points of history. One which is almost always covered this time of year is the Witch Trials, not just of Salem, Mass, but other areas as well. King James I, the king to succeed Elizabeth I and who commissioned the King James version of the Bible, was famous for many things, one of which was his intense fear of and frenzy over persecuting those he had deemed witches. We won't say his persecution *of* witches, of course, because none of the people tried and put to death for witchcraft were witches. Rather, they were primarily (though not solely) women who were targeted over suspicions that they were

engaging in ungodly acts. And that word “ungodly” is important to consider when we think about the history of the witch trials, because the 16th and 17th centuries after the Reformation in the church, were times in which people were passionately focused on bringing about a more godly state in which sin and superstition and anything not of God would be wiped out. Throughout this time in England, thousands of so-called witches, most of them women, went to their deaths, brutally, because they were seen to have been in some way conspiring or consorting with the unholy or evil.

As I listened to my podcasts this week, I began to think about the witch trial hysteria and the emotions behind it. These were people just like us, caught up in a religious fervor, paranoid over malevolence they believed they saw all around them. The world was going to hell in a handbasket and it must be witches that were to blame for all of it. Of course, we know that’s not the case, the so-called witches were merely scapegoats used to assuage the horrific emotions and impulses of the worst of humanity. All driven by emotion.

When we think about it, emotions play a huge role in so much of what we do and how we conduct ourselves in the world. Unfortunately, the primary emotion most people act from is not love, as it should rightly be. Instead, the negative emotions seem to in many cases prompt and drive so much passion: fear, anger, greed, jealousy, and revenge among them. These emotions drove much of what happened during the witch trials and, I believe, are a major source of so much of the division and pain in our world today. All of these emotions provoked violence and death in the 16th and 17th centuries and, unfortunately, have the same impact today, literal witch trials notwithstanding. What’s so interesting about the emotions that ruled

the day back then is that it was their mingling with religious fervor that took the lives of their friends, family, and neighbors.

We are in week four of our six-week series on the Apostle's Creed, in which we examine the statements in the Creed so many know so well and think about the why behind our belief rather than merely the what. You may be wondering why on earth we're talking about Witch Trials and King James I as we examine our deeply held beliefs, and I need you to hang in there with me, because we're getting there. Up until this point in our discussion, the creed has focused entirely on beliefs about the Triune God and, as we discussed in week 1, this was purposeful: one of the primary motivations behind this and the Nicene Creed was to solidify the trinitarian understanding of God: the Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. But after a brief discourse on our Sovereign God, the Creed takes a turn...

Right after we say, "I believe in the Holy Spirit," we shift to the church and the communion of the saints (which we will discuss next week on All Saint's Sunday) and then to the forgiveness of sins and ending with the resurrection of the body and life everlasting. Knowing we cannot talk about the Creed indefinitely, I had a choice to make here in what we would talk about this week and, as I looked at the state of the world and thought about the Witch Trials, I couldn't help but turn to this idea of forgiveness and the way in which our inability to act with forgiving hearts turns us cold and lends toward the brokenness which pervades the human condition as well as the world. Resurrection and life everlasting can take care of themselves; we need to talk about forgiveness.

For the witch trials to have killed thousands of people in England and beyond, there must be all the negative emotions I mentioned before and, at the same time, there must be a state of the heart which is ungracious, unmerciful, and unforgiving. To turn perceived slights, misunderstandings, and mistakes, into paranoia, persecution, violence, and murder against others, we must completely forget that we, too, are imperfect and capable of slights, misunderstandings and mistakes.

Sister Joan Chittister notes that when we see people behaving publicly in a way that is deemed ungodly or immoral, we're very quick to offer self-congratulations where the virtue of our own private lives are concerned. "We read the headlines," Sister Chittister writes, "and clucked over the existence of organized crime but completely forgot about our own virtuous glee at the bombing of civilians or the evictions of the unemployed in this rich and righteous country." She's right. We shake our heads at our neighbors exposed infidelity and tut at the men and women who choose to become sex workers, but forget the times we drive by and refuse to so much as make eye contact with the poor mother begging on the corner, let alone offer her a few dollars or a meal.

The Creed spends more than half of its lines telling us about the wondrous Triune God and then it gets right down to business, because as good as God is and as good as we *can be*, having been made in God's image, the Creed is not at all blind to who we have become. The creed acknowledges what Sister Joan calls, "the rifts in the soul of humanity," but it does not put its focus on evil or guilt, instead, the Creed turns right to forgiveness. Because as bad as humankind *can be* at its worst, God is so much better, so much more gracious, loving, and merciful. The creed doesn't draw our

attention to how terrible we *can* be, but rather to how loving God actually *is*—God doesn't require us to be perfect to be deserving of forgiveness. God knows we can never be perfect, God knows all we have done and all we will do. God knows all the sins we have committed against others and the ones we are yet capable of and yet God says to each and every one of us, "I forgive you."

Drawing a contrast between the weakness of humankind and the strength of the grace of God, the Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Roman church writes, "For if the many died through one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many" (5:15). When all is said and done, we who may commit injustices and abuses we may never be fully aware of, will ultimately be forgiven, in the words of Joan Chittister, "the crassness of our sins" (186). She writes that we are, "small, petty, selfish, mean, uncaring—and forgiven" Because, in the words of the Apostle Paul, "where sin increased, grace abounded all that more" (5:20).

Think about that for a second. Think about the worst thing you have done in your life and know that you are forgiven. Think about the love of a God who can look at all the terrible things we have ever done or could do and who would say, before he says anything else, "I forgive you." Forgiveness is something we, as human beings, are truly terrible at. Even the best of us never reach divine-levels of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is hard. It can even be painful to get to that point. But let me ask you something, what has happened when you have forgiven?

Forgiveness is freeing. To forgive is to let go of the poison of resentment

that eats away at your very soul until only bitterness and emptiness are left. Sister Joan tells us, “To forgive is to be like God. God, the Forgiver, stands before us, beckoning us to holiness, showing us forgiveness as the way to wholeness: to mental health, to personal growth, to independence of emotions, to freedom of soul” (187).

Consider Jesus’s last words on the cross—among them was a request that the people who persecuted and killed him would not be punished, nor that he would be avenged, but that they would be forgiven. We often focus on what Jesus’s death means for our souls in death and gloss over what those words meant Jesus wanted for us in life: to be forgiven. To be whole. To be free. To be all of those things, we need to forgive, too.

Where there is anger, resentment, fear, jealousy, greed, and selfishness, there is brokenness. Forgiveness is about restoration. Forgiveness is about fixing the breaches in our relationships, not just with others, but with God. Now, I want to be very clear that I am not talking about a cheap kind of forgiveness and I’m not saying that forgiveness ought to be quick. Just because you have not forgiven yet, does not mean you should rush to it, nor that you never will get there. Forgiveness is as much a process as anything. Quick, easy forgiveness isn’t forgiveness, it’s niceness, it’s a Band-Aid on a gushing wound. It fixes nothing. True forgiveness is a state of the soul. It requires an acknowledgement that hurt has happened, cannot be undone, but must nonetheless be worked through. It is, in the words of Sister Joan, “the awareness that though evil has been done, the spirit is whole” (189).

Far from the vengeance that led to the violence and murderous events of the witch trials, in a willingness to seek true forgiveness is more life, not less. In that forgiveness is grace and freedom, not necessarily for the one who has caused the harm, but certainly for us. That's why it's important. There is little more that is as life-giving as true forgiveness. Jesus goes to his death on the cross and, in his final act before commending his soul to God, the Creator, Jesus asks that those who have killed him be forgiven. And then, three days later, in an act that changed the world forever, he is resurrected. We see through Jesus that, in forgiveness, there is not just healing, but new life.

Sister Joan ends her chapter on "The Forgiveness of Sins" with a prayer found by the side of a child who had died at a concentration camp at the end of WWII. The prayer reads this way:

"O Lord,

Remember not only the men
and women of goodwill,
But all those of ill will.
But do not remember all the suffering
They have inflicted upon us;
Remember the fruits we have brought
Thanks to this suffering—
Our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility,
Our courage, our generosity,
the greatness of heart
Which has grown out of all of this;
And when they come to judgement,

Let all the fruits which we have borne
Be their forgiveness. Amen.”

Think about the kind of person whose heart reaches the point of writing this poem. Think about the holiness present even in the most wretched, brutal moments of human history. Think about the graciousness of the person who can be this forgiving after one of the most horrific moments in the history of the world. O Lord, let us not be like those caught up in the witch trials of old, but let us instead be as forgiving as the author of this prayer. For us, for the world, let the fruits which they have borne, be our forgiveness, too. Amen.